



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE AND MANAGEMENT

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE CONFLICT MANAGING STYLES INFLUENCING CORPORATE DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

Planning in organization is aimed towards progress while conflict promotes regress path. Conflict between Superior-subordinates has been a main issue which affects decisions in organization. Traditionally, conflict has been considered to be an avoidable issue, the origin always traceable to trouble makers in the organization. The modern management addresses the whole problem from a different perspective by defining roles and goals of individuals clearly. Though modern management perceives conflicts to be inevitable and are integral part of organization, superior-subordinate conflicts are very high. This paper presents the strategy chosen by superior/subordinate depending on his conflict management styles, either of them not aware of others strategy on the prisoner's dilemma principle. The results indicate that conflict occurs in the organizational system and cannot be removed. Education and Experience has some effect apart from cognitive behaviour in choosing the conflict management style. Good decisions are not made when there is interpersonal conflict except where both superior and subordinate chooses a low risk strategy. When both superior and subordinate chooses a high risk strategy, both would stick to their conflict management style. In a high risk strategy for superior or subordinate, there may be a tendency to change their conflict management styles.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive behaviour, Conflict Management Styles, Decision-making, Prisoner's Dilemma.

INTRODUCTION

 Organizations are open systems and face uncertainty in several areas, uncertainty resulting from the gap between what is known and what needs to be known to make correct decisions. One of the chief determinants of such uncertainty is conflict which is perceived in different manner by individuals or groups depending on the perception of the individual or group and the environment in which they work. Thus conflict connotes hostility, rivalry or disagreement between individuals or groups. Pondy (1967) pointed that conflict is used in four ways in literature to describe i) antecedent conditions of conflict behaviour as scarcity of resources or policy differences ii) effective states of individuals involved iii) cognitive states of individuals and iv) conflict behaviour ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression.

Intra-individual, Interpersonal, Inter-group and organization conflict are varied forms of conflict arising in the same hierarchical order progressing from micro to macro level. Though hierarchy may be seen from intra-individual to organization conflict, there are no established principles that support the view that every organizational conflict is as a result of intra-individual conflict. In instances of intra-individual conflict an individual's frustration may result due to restricting the person's motivated drive before the desired goal is reached and the individual's reaction may be overt (outward) or covert (inward). When opinions of co-worker differ on a high degree, interpersonal conflict arises and superior-subordinate is a classical example of this type of conflict. Every plan may not be workable because it was set by a superior. If ideologies are lacking, superior having misconception or lacking skill and concept about activities they are not workable. Excessive thrust on activities of unworkable plans imposed on subordinate by superior may result in conflict, sometimes resulting in retrogression. Inter-group conflict arises due to groups being interdependent; goals being incompatible; or even distrust between groups. Whetten and Cameron (1991) proposed that i) Personal differences ii) Information deficiency iii) Role incompatibility and iv) Environmental stress are the four major sources of interpersonal conflicts. Further, Whetten and Cameron suggest that a disagreement about who is factually correct easily turns into a bitter argument over who is morally right. Such issues become highly emotional and take moral overtone leading to conflict. The type of the strategy chosen by the superior/subordinate may be dependent on the conflict management styles they possess. Integrating style; Obliging Style; Dominating style; Avoiding style; and the Compromising style are the five methods conceptualized in handling conflict in organizations (Follett 1940) and many authors have used this method in understanding conflict management.

Management, in earlier times considered conflict as an important topic and provided equal importance to planning and conflict. This was based on the premises that conflict could be avoided as they were caused by trouble makers. Scapegoats were considered and were accepted as inevitable (Kelly, 1975). Though work has been carried out in this field, most of the literature dates old, the research work relating to superior-subordinate is very limited (Swaminathan & Rajkumar, 2010, Lee, 2008). In most developing countries strategic planning is given more importance. In India, consequent to liberalization in 1991, there has been tremendous growth in both manufacturing and service sectors and there has also been higher attrition rate. Though higher attrition rate may not be directly attributed to conflict alone, the economies of demand and supply of human skills & talent being harmonious, much thought has not been given to address conflicts in organization, thus its impact on corporate decisions. Many organizations have the policy of exit interview wherein the individual's feelings are heard. Though this may throw some light on addressing potential similar conflicts in future, focus is not given to conflicts occurring between superiors and subordinate. Thus modern management by changing the roles and goals have perceived that certain amount of conflict is inevitable and are integral to nature of change.

OBJECTIVE

The study envisages the conflict management styles chosen by the superior/subordinate in addressing conflict and situations that affect corporate decision making through application of the prisoner's dilemma principle.

METHODOLOGY

The study covers five conflict management styles that affect the superior and subordinate relationship identified by Follett (1940) and these are considered to understand if they have any influence in choosing a strategy by collecting responses of 20 superiors and 20 subordinates, all studying management course (MBA) drawn on random sample using a five point Likert scale with the scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The analysis is made in consonance with the objective and hypotheses.

HYPOTHESES

Two propositions are formulated to understand the move by the superior and subordinate in case of conflict. While one proposition is related to the subordinate’s style of managing conflict, the other is related to the superior’s style of managing conflict.

Proposition 1 (P1): The subordinate’s desire to remain in the organization and the extension of cooperation given to the superior is not dependent on Subordinate’s style of managing conflict.

Proposition 2 (P2): The Superior’s desire to retain the Subordinate and the cooperation expected by the Superior is not dependent on Superior’s style of managing conflict.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The subordinate in order to manage conflict may choose a strategy to remain in the organization. Such a strategy is driven by the reality that the superior has the power, either legitimate or coercive (French & Raven, 1959) to determine the continuance of the subordinate in the organization. The subordinate may also understand the difficulty in finding an equally suitable alternative job. The superior may ignore sporadic conflict and may choose a strategy to retain the subordinate understanding the difficulty of getting an equally potentially good candidate for the job and thus may continue with the subordinate. Expectation is always futuristic and expecting future action in line with the desires of the superior is a risky option for the superior as the subordinate may or may not extend cooperation. The subordinate may choose a strategy to remain in the organization and the superior may choose a strategy to expect cooperation from the subordinate. This would be a high risk strategy for the subordinate as superior may demand a high cooperation that may lead to intrapersonal conflict for the subordinate. Where a superior expects full cooperation and subordinate prefers to extend no cooperation, this would be a dominant strategy involving high risk for both superior and subordinate. The dominant strategy implies the rule – expect the worst from the other(s) leads to worse position (Koutsoyiannis, p.413). The four strategies are abbreviated as SS1; SS2; SS3 and SS4 and the various strategy positions are indicated in Table 1.

Given that in none of the four situations, the superiors and subordinates are not aware of others strategy, this problem takes similar characteristics of the “Prisoner’s dilemma” dealt in Theory of Games. Though in Economics, prisoner’s dilemma is used to represent situations under oligopolistic markets, the analogy is identifiable with conflict. Thus, an attempt has been made to understand individual’s choice by studying the nature of their conflict management styles and the situations where it affects decision making. The four strategies viz., SS1; SS2; SS3 and SS4 are analyzed in the following paragraphs. The propositions 1 and 2 are associated with strategies SS2 and SS3 respectively and these propositions are tested using chi-square. The results are presented in Table 2 and 3.

TABLE 1: TABLE SHOWING SUPERIOR – SUBORDINATE OPTION IN CHOOSING A STRATEGY

		Superior’s Option	
		Superiors Desire to Retain Subordinate	Superiors Expectation of Cooperation from subordinate
Subordinate’s Option	Subordinates Desire to Remain in the organization	Low risk strategy for both (SS1)	High risk strategy for subordinate (SS2)
	Subordinates Extending no Cooperation to Superiors	High risk strategy for superior (SS3)	High risk strategy for both (SS4)

SS1: LOW RISK STRATEGY FOR THE SUPERIOR AND SUBORDINATE

Under a low risk strategy for both superior and the subordinate conflicts are minimum (SS1). Under this strategy, a harmonious relation exists between superior and the subordinate irrespective of the conflict management style of the individuals and business decisions taken may be good. Reuver and Woerkom (2010) in their study indicate that non-confrontation strategy is negatively related to commitment. The superior and the subordinate may possess integrating style of conflict management. This strategy though is good and ideal; it is rarely seen in all spheres of management. Since the relation is harmonious, the subordinate or the superior would not change their nature conflict management style.

SS2: HIGH RISK STRATEGY FOR THE SUBORDINATE

The proposition 1 is rejected ($p > 0.05$) and it is concluded that the subordinate’s style of managing conflict has significant effect in choosing to remain in the organization and to extend cooperation as expected by the superior, it would be a high risk risky strategy for the subordinate (SS2). This is because a higher desire to remain in the organization may be associated with a higher cooperation demanded from the superior. As the gap between superiors and subordinates will increase as a direct consequence of punitive procedures, the subordinate tend to avoid participation (Lee, 2008). The subordinate may at a stage be overburdened with work and when the desire to stay is intensified the gap between the superior and subordinate would be narrowed down and in extreme situation inter-personal conflict may turn out to be an intra-personal conflict, the subordinate being under stress is unlikely to take good decisions. From the employees perspective job pressure was more where the boss was low on consideration and boss playing favourites and taking advantage of situations (Swaminathan & Rajkumar, 2010). In order to cope up with the situation, the subordinate may even change the nature of his conflict management style from dominant to obliging.

TABLE 2: TABLE SHOWING CHI-SQUARE RESULTS FOR PROPOSITION 1

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.867	12	.456
Likelihood ratio	14.507	12	.270
Linear by Linear Association	0.124	1	.725
N of Valid Cases	20		

SS3: HIGH RISK STRATEGY FOR THE SUPERIOR

The proposition 2 is also rejected ($p > 0.05$) and it is concluded that the superior’s style of managing conflict has significant effect in choosing to retain the subordinate by seeking cooperation. This is a high risk strategy for the superior (SS3). This is because a higher desire to retain subordinate without getting cooperation puts the superior under stress. The overburdened superior may fail to take good decisions and when the results are not promising, the superior is likely to lose the job. In order to safeguard the position, the superior may come out with some incentives to the subordinate, at the same time avoiding conflict. Positive relationship exists between a manager’s collaborating strategies and subordinates’ experiencing interpersonal and performance rewards (Hatfield & Hatfield, 1996). The superior may change the nature of his management style from dominant to compromise.

TABLE 3: TABLE SHOWING CHI-SQUARE RESULTS FOR PROPOSITION 2

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.348	12	.499
Likelihood ratio	14.314	12	.281
Linear by Linear Association	0.512	1	.474
N of Valid Cases	20		

SS4: HIGH RISK STRATEGY FOR THE SUPERIOR AND SUBORDINATE

A high risk strategy for both superior and the subordinate is generally characterized by Avoidance & Dominance conflict management styles. There would be sidestepping, buck-passing (Lee, 2008) or uncooperative (Blake & Mouton, 1964) move by the superior/subordinate. Under SS4, the power of the superior is met by the aggression of the subordinate. Buck-passing by superior is met by withdrawal of the subordinate. The decisions taken may not be collaborative and the rate of attrition may be higher. This is detrimental to the organization.

The high interdependence of subordinate and superior in carrying out tasks has a negative influence on corporate decision whenever conflict arises, irrespective of the conflict management styles followed by superior/subordinate. Thus, each of the two would not choose a strategy on their own while dealing with conflicts. They wait for the other to choose a strategy and may react according to the strategy chosen by the other. However, both may prefer to choose the low risk strategy avoiding the other strategies which may be detrimental to them.

There are several reasons that influence the style of functioning of superior-subordinate when conflict takes place. Experience is a potential tool that provides alternative employment and education supports it. The individual's knowledge about the subject domain and the skill to apply it in specific situations come from experience (Rangaraj & Thimmarayappa, 2011). The modern management is mostly about handling multitask for which multi-skill is required. Education provides the basic nuances about multi-skill and experience nurtures it and thus a person can handle multitask. Therefore even a subordinate who can handle multitask may remain in the organization for a longer period even though he is involved in confrontation because his decisions are vital for the organization and his style of conflict management would not be questioned. Thus it is likely that education and experience may have some influence on the conflict management style of the individual.

LIMITATIONS

A major limitation of this study is the position of an individual in the organisational hierarchy who would be superior to some and subordinate to others. This position is identifiable by both SS2 and SS3 and the individual may have to adjust his conflict management style quite often depending on his subordinate and superior's behaviour. This is not addressed in the study as 2 x 2 matrix permits only four strategies. Apart from this, the intensity of conflict from petty to serious that affect the superior-subordinate relationship is not made.

CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the limitations, the application of Prisoner's dilemma principle in understanding conflict management style between superior and subordinate is unique and unearths the reason for an individual who may continue to work in the organisation despite a high level of conflict. The subordinate continually questioning the superiors move may lead to conflict, the former perceiving the latter to be inexperienced and harsh. Likewise, the acts of subordinate questioned by superior continually also leads to conflict, the subordinate perceiving the superior to be obdurate. In either case, the cognitive roles of the individuals are manifested. In a high risk strategy for either superior or subordinate there may be a tendency to change the conflict management styles. While several methods are suggested to resolve superior-subordinate conflicts, referring to a higher authority is generally considered to be a better method to resolve conflicts. Because organizations follow hierarchical structure, the conflicts are thought to be resolved better through an arbitrator taking a decision, which would be accepted by both the parties. However, the decision of the arbitrator is also questionable because of superior – subordinate relationship. Therefore, even with the intervention of arbitrator, conflict may continue to exist. Organizations are a collection of people with varied cognitive behaviours and thus conflict exists in any organizational system. The conflict management styles, experience and skills possessed by an individual determines the level of conflict in the organization. In essence, superior – subordinate conflict can never be removed from the system. At most, they can be reduced only through providing training in the organization so that there is uniformity in most of the common activities, the rules and procedures being made clear to both superior and subordinates.

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